





# When positivity turns toxic

UNRELENTING OPTIMISM IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY MAY DO MORE HARM THAN GOOD. **JENNY ROWE** EXPLAINS HOW TO RECOGNISE AND STEER CLEAR OF TOXIC POSITIVITY

From birthday cards to Instagram captions, I share inspirational quotes all the time. And there's nothing wrong with that. Positivity is a powerful force for good; a single, well-timed comment from a friend or family member can stop a spiral of anxious thoughts in its tracks. But 'toxic positivity' is not the same as trying to remain hopeful when you are feeling down. It is the potentially unhealthy over-generalisation that optimism is the best way to approach all of life's obstacles.

Dealt out at the wrong time, toxic positivity serves to at best belittle, and at worst blame a person for having negative emotions, which results in them being bottled up. So, while positive thinking remains a valid method for coping with a bad situation, it is not always the best way, and certainly isn't the only way.

## The positivity factory

It's undeniable that social media and the internet have allowed the positivity factory to operate at unprecedented levels. Between 2019 and 2020, Pinterest searches for 'positive quotes to live by' surged by a huge 279 per cent.

But it's nothing new. French writer Voltaire called out toxic positivity as early as the 18th century when German philosopher Leibniz reasoned

that we live in 'the best of all possible worlds'. Any evil and suffering, Leibniz argued, could be remedied with faith. Voltaire's retort in his 1759 satirical novel *Candide* challenged this sanguine attitude by highlighting the blatant facts of war, natural disaster and personal misfortune. Nevertheless, almost three centuries later, Leibnizian optimism lives on in a multi-billion-pound positivity industry.

The backlash to this positive outpouring is embodied by #instagramvsreality, with images and stories of a grittier reality breaking up the constant stream of good news and celebrations that conventionally populate social media platforms. Recent testimonies given by athletes during the Tokyo Olympics, such as American gymnast Simone Biles, are also indicative of a society becoming more conscious that airing, rather than grinning and bearing, negative emotions and experiences can be beneficial for everyone.

## Symptoms of excess

In fact, a 2008 study showed that consistently reminding ourselves to be grateful for what we have while in the middle of strife and struggle doesn't actually alleviate feelings of sadness, fear or anxiety. More recently, in 2018 a study of 1,300 adults found that those who

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### 3 REASONS BEING TOO POSITIVE CAN BE A BAD THING

- 1 It prevents experiences being shared. If we only ever respond to our friends' concerns with positivity, we won't find out what caused their crisis, which not only has detrimental effects for them personally but also socially, potentially preventing discussion about political issues.
- 2 It stifles authentic human interaction. Those having a difficult time don't just need someone to talk to, they need someone to listen. This process, when genuine, can strengthen relationships and create authentic connections. Toxic positivity blocks this channel of connection.
- 3 It stops us building resilience. If we cannot acknowledge and move through emotions when they arise, we may find it more difficult to deal with the same feelings later on. Toxic positivity inhibits the development of other valuable coping mechanisms.

habitually accept challenging thoughts and emotions rather than judging them are more likely to have better psychological health in the long-term.

In the short-term, too much positivity, especially in the immediate aftermath of a crisis, can make us feel that having negative emotions – such as sadness, fear, anxiety, anger or jealousy – is a failure or weakness, when actually it is very much part and parcel with the human experience. Neuro-Linguistic Programming coach and author Rebecca Lockwood ([rebeccalockwood.org.uk](http://rebeccalockwood.org.uk)), who helps her clients alter their thought patterns and behaviours to achieve their goals, explains how this might manifest: “If you find yourself trying to brush over your emotions it could be a sign that the positivity around you has become overwhelming,” says Rebecca. “Another indication is if you feel

guilty for feeling negative or down about something because you are not able to ‘look on the bright side.’” You might try starting to hide your feelings from those around you if they are repeatedly invalidating your feelings by reminding you that ‘it could be worse.’”

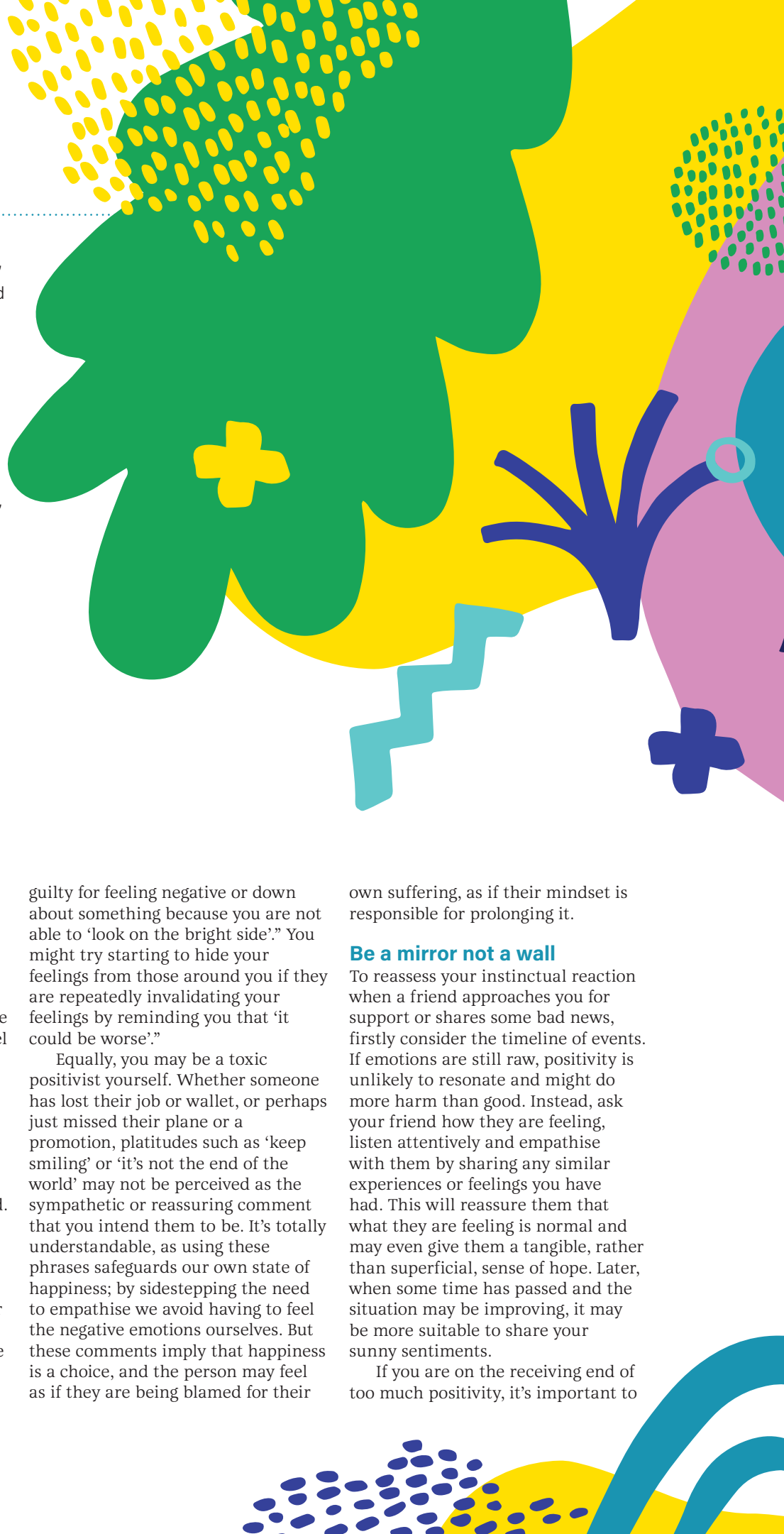
Equally, you may be a toxic positivist yourself. Whether someone has lost their job or wallet, or perhaps just missed their plane or a promotion, platitudes such as ‘keep smiling’ or ‘it’s not the end of the world’ may not be perceived as the sympathetic or reassuring comment that you intend them to be. It’s totally understandable, as using these phrases safeguards our own state of happiness; by sidestepping the need to empathise we avoid having to feel the negative emotions ourselves. But these comments imply that happiness is a choice, and the person may feel as if they are being blamed for their

own suffering, as if their mindset is responsible for prolonging it.

#### Be a mirror not a wall

To reassess your instinctual reaction when a friend approaches you for support or shares some bad news, firstly consider the timeline of events. If emotions are still raw, positivity is unlikely to resonate and might do more harm than good. Instead, ask your friend how they are feeling, listen attentively and empathise with them by sharing any similar experiences or feelings you have had. This will reassure them that what they are feeling is normal and may even give them a tangible, rather than superficial, sense of hope. Later, when some time has passed and the situation may be improving, it may be more suitable to share your sunny sentiments.

If you are on the receiving end of too much positivity, it’s important to





remember that “the person isn’t intending to dismiss your feelings,” says Rebecca. “They are most likely trying their best to help but may not know what else to say.” The best way you can respond, Rebecca advises, is to simply “explain that you want to honour your feelings.” This may prevent the conversation being closed down so abruptly in future.

If you think you’ve begun to bury your own negative emotions with positive affirmations, Rebecca suggests journalling. “Start by writing down what you can see in your surroundings, then what you can hear and then finally what you are feeling. This will really help you to acknowledge what is happening in the moment instead of overlooking and not dealing with it.”

### The rollercoaster to resilience

The good news is positivity and negativity are not mutually exclusive.

As with many things, a balance can be achieved. In this instance, that might mean feeling upset in the moment while looking forward towards a better time in the not-too-distant future.

The benefit of finding this sweet spot, and being able to really sit with our emotions, is that we become better able to cope with similar situations in the future – in other words, we become more resilient. And surely this is what long-term happiness is made of? Instead of demanding that we sustain positivity 24/7, we should aspire to be able to cope with the rollercoaster of life in increasingly better ways; and help others cope with their ups and downs by better understanding and opening up about ours. The irony of ending on an inspirational quote is not lost on me, but it’s a good’un by author David Levithan: “Do not just seek happiness for yourself. Seek happiness for all.” ●



#### THE AUTHOR

**Jenny Rowe** is a wellbeing and travel writer who loves diving into the zeitgeist and exploring the origins of our habits and beliefs.